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Bush Aide Discussed Contra Aid

Gregg Set Up Meeting on Rebel Resupply Effort

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The top national security adviser to Vice President Bush set up a meeting between a former CIA official and members of the CIA and Defense and State departments in August to discuss the former CIA official's concerns about adequate aid flowing to the Nicaraguan contras.

Until now, the Bush aide, Donald P. Gregg, has told associates that the only discussions he had with the former CIA official, Felix Rodriguez, were about his work for the El Salvador air force.

Gregg said yesterday he does not remember telling Bush about the meeting involving Rodriguez, himself and other U.S. officials. "I don't recall briefing him on it," he said. "I don't think I reported it to him. I can't swear I didn't, but I don't remember it."

Gregg later said that he did not think that the August meeting, first disclosed in The New York Times yesterday, was important enough for him to inform Bush or his spokesman Marlin Fitzwater about, despite the controversy caused when a C123K cargo plane carrying weapons to the contras was shot down Oct. 5 in Nicaragua.

"It didn't come to my mind that Felix was that involved, as an operator, or as a coordinator," Gregg said.

The vice president, in October, said he had met twice with Rodriguez and that their meetings concerned only El Salvador and the guerrilla insurgency there. "I have

never, ever had a discussion with him about the contras and contra support of any kind," Bush said.

Fitzwater said that he did not think Gregg had told Bush about the Rodriguez-contras meeting, but that he was unable to reach the vice president yesterday.

Rodriguez' role in that resupply effort and how much Bush and Gregg knew about it have been a sensitive issue for the vice president's office because Bush is a leading Republican contender for the 1988 presidential nomination.

Gregg said in a telephone interview that Rodriguez, whom he helped get a job in early 1985 with the Salvadoran air force, called him in August and said he "was concerned that there would be a gap" in the contra supply line. "He feared it was going to evaporate," Gregg recalled. "So I put him in touch with people he could pass on his concern to."

Gregg said his impression was that Rodriguez was worried that both private arms and U.S. humanitarian aid to the rebels might disappear before \$100 million in new U.S. aid became available.

Recent interviews with crewmembers of the private contra air force and documents on their flights showed that Rodriguez, who went by the name of Max Gomez, was not a formal member of the private resupply effort but more of a liaison between the American crews and the Salvadoran air force, which controlled the Ilopango air base where the planes were based.

Gregg, who has declined several requests for interviews, said yesterday that he broke his silence because "we felt it was time to put to rest speculation that more was going on than was going on."

The 58-year-old Gregg, a career CIA officer who served on the National Security Council staff and became Bush's chief national security adviser in 1982, gave this account of his relationship with Rodriguez and the private contra aid network:

He said Rodriguez, whom he knew from their CIA service together in Vietnam, called him in late 1984 or early 1985 and told him "he wanted to go to El Salvador

and do the same kind of operation he did in Vietnam" because the pattern of the leftist insurgency there seemed the same. In Vietnam, Rodriguez had flown small helicopters on missions to spot Vietcong insurgents so nearby helicopter gunships or elite troops could attack them, Gregg recalled.

He said he introduced his old colleague to several U.S. officials, including Thomas Pickering, then-ambassador to El Salvador; Langhorne Motley, the top State Department official for the region, and Nestor Sanchez, another CIA alumnus, who is the Pentagon's Latin American expert. "I told them this guy is tremendous and I knew he could sell himself," Gregg said. He said he assumed one of those officials recommended that the Salvadorans hire Rodriguez, which they did.

At the time, January 1985, Gregg also introduced Rodriguez to Bush. "The vice president had a great interest in El Salvador since visiting there in December of 1983," he noted.

Shortly after Rodriguez was hired, Gregg added, he wrote a note to Army Col. James Steele, chief U.S. military adviser in El Salvador, saying how helpful he thought Rodriguez would be to the counterinsurgency effort.

Over the next year, Gregg recalled, he would occasionally get calls from Rodriguez in El Salvador "to tell how his operations were going and how he needed helicopter parts for the helicopter he was flying."

During those calls, he said, they never discussed the contras and Gregg said he did not know Rodriguez played even an unofficial role in their private air supply network.

Rodriguez came to Washington last May and met with Gregg, Bush and Edwin Corr, the new ambassador to El Salvador, Gregg said, to report on his helicopter operations against the Salvadoran insurgents. "He had some interesting pictures

of the operations he was carrying on and I thought it would be of great interest to the vice president And Corr was in town and he stopped in at the same time."

Since the October crash of the cargo plane that killed two Americans and resulted in the capture of American Eugene Hasenfus, Steele and Corr have been identified as having direct knowledge of the private supply flights.

It was not until Rodriguez called him last August, Gregg said, that he learned that his friend had any role in the contra resupply mission. "All we ever talked about before was El

Salvador," he said. In that call, Rodriguez expressed concern that "there would be a gap" in resupplying the contras with both guns and humanitarian aid, Gregg said.

The \$27 million Congress had appropriated for nonlethal aid had almost all been spent and \$100 million in new military aid would not be available until Oct. 1.

The Washington Post reported last Sunday that documents from the resupply operation showed that cash was short. On Aug. 8, the documents show Rodriguez gave a pep talk to some of the crew. "It was very brave of you to get into these

old airplanes," he was quoted as saying. He also asked them to ride out the network's financial problems, even suggesting they work without pay for a few weeks.

Gregg said he recalled the telephone conversation with Rodriguez came about that time and the meeting he set up for Rodriguez with CIA, Pentagon and State Department officials was around Aug. 12. He said "Felix was reassured" by the meeting but Gregg said he never learned what action resulted from it. He said he soon went on leave to have minor surgery and Bush went on vacation to Maine.
